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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002970

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [KPAO](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: ARROYO SAYS "I AM SORRY"

REF: A. OPS CENTER - MANILA 06/28/05 TELECON

[B](#). MANILA 2887

[C](#). MANILA 2840

[D](#). MANILA 2815

Classified By: Political Officer Andrew McClearn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In a brief national address on June 27, a subdued President Arroyo admitted that a taped telephone conversation with an election official last year was "a lapse in judgment" and said "I am sorry." Asked subsequently for media comment, Charge underscored that the USG supports transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. According to Embassy contacts, former president Aquino and Manila Archbishop Rosales, as well as by members of her Cabinet, pushed Arroyo to explain herself to the Filipino public at last. Reaction to the President's speech has been mixed at best. While likely worth doing, the admission may be "too little, too late" to (re)gain public and political support, much less to enable her to move forward on her substantive agenda. End Summary.

Arroyo Apologizes

[1](#)2. (U) In a 4 minute national TV and radio address delivered the evening of June 27, a subdued President Arroyo admitted that a telephone conversation with an election official -- whom she did not name -- last year was "a lapse in judgment" and she said "I am sorry." She did not specifically admit to being the voice on the now widely circulated audiotape of an apparent wiretapped conversation, however. In her remarks:

-- Arroyo acknowledged that the issues raised by the taped conversations had "spun out of control" and that the nation deserved an explanation;
-- she cited the slowness of the 2004 election's national canvassing process, and confessed to "feeling anxious to protect my votes," which led her to discuss the vote count "with a COMELEC (Commission on Elections) official;"
-- she denied any intent to influence the outcome of the election and reiterated that the May 2004 electoral process was credible, as established by domestic and international observers;
-- she expressed regret at having taken so long to address the public about the matter and said she took "full responsibility" for her actions;
-- after repeating the short apology in Tagalog using earthy, populist-tinged language, Arroyo expressed a desire to push past the tape scandal and "move on with the business of governing." She insisted she had a "mandate to govern" and that she had already carried out "tough but necessary decisions" in order to readjust the economy and raise new revenues in order to "reinvest in the people." Asking for unity, Arroyo called for the Philippines to enter "the next phase of the reform agenda," which would include expanded social services and increased anti-corruption efforts.

Mission Reaction

[1](#)3. (U) Media sources asked Charge for comment after the conclusion of the speech. Charge responded: "The U.S. government supports transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. As the U.S. has repeatedly said, the search for truth is always a good thing, as is also abiding by the Constitution and due process."

Pressure from Cory and Archbishop?

[1](#)4. (C) According to Embassy contacts, former president Corazon Aquino and Manila Archbishop Gaudencio Rosales pushed Arroyo during a June 26 meeting at Malacanang Palace to explain herself publicly -- or resign -- and indicated that they would withdraw their support if she did not do so before the funeral of Cardinal Jaime Sin on June 28. Aquino issued a statement immediately following Arroyo's speech that "Her admission of judgmental lapses leading to improper conduct on

her part is a truly welcome statement." Vice President Noli de Castro lauded the "courage" of the President and called on Filipinos to put the issue of the tapes behind them. President Aquino sat with the President and the Vice President during the three-hour long funeral on June 28, over which Archbishop Rosales presided.

15. (C) Congressman Jesli Lapus, the Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and a key GMA ally in the passage of her fiscal measures, separately told A/DCM that the Cabinet had also heightened its pressure on her to go public with an explanation and apology. He cited Finance Secretary Cesar Purisima and Defense Secretary Avelino Cruz in particular as playing key roles in convincing her to address the public.

Reaction: The Pro and the Con

16. (C) Reaction to the President's speech has been decidedly mixed. Senate President Franklin Drilon applauded the speech but urged the President to follow up with "concrete actions" to implement necessary reforms. House Speaker Jose de Venecia issued a statement from his travels in Europe claiming that Arroyo "has regained the moral high ground" and expressing the hope that the President could now return to the business of governing. Rep. Abraham Mitra told poloff that Arroyo's majority in the House remained overwhelming despite some slippage and predicted that any move to impeach her would not be successful. Congressman Lapus, however, privately expressed doubt Arroyo could be able to move forward with additional needed economic measures. He added that Cabinet members had reportedly already convinced Arroyo also to ask her husband Mike to leave the country for an undetermined timeframe, and to convince her son Mikey and brother-in-law Iggy to resign from Congress due to reports linking them to jueteng (illegal gambling) profiteering.

17. (C) Opposition members seized on the confession as a sign of the President's guilt and continued to insist that she must resign or face impeachment. Some also called for snap elections. Senator Panfilo "Ping" Lacson pressed Arroyo to quit: "Now that she has authenticated the tape, she must vacate." House Minority Leader Francis Escudero said that he accepted Arroyo's apology but maintained that "Gloria-Gate" was far from over. He declared that if "she cannot distinguish between what is moral and illegal, then she must resign." Former president Joseph Estrada, who remains under house arrest on plunder charges, called her admission "a high crime and betrayal of the people's right to suffrage." Congressman Teodoro "Teddy" Casino of the leftist Bayan Muna party told poloff that describing the taped conversations "as a lapse in judgment was putting it too lightly, since she admitted she did something wrong." Casino said the next logical step was impeachment. One private citizen has already filed an impeachment petition with the House, but no member of the House has yet endorsed the petition, as required by House rules.

Comment

18. (C) Many believe that Arroyo's dramatic statement was "too little, too late" but that it may still stem the tide -- for now -- in the absence of new scandals. Even some opposition figures have predicted that no further major public demonstrations are likely during the rainy season, which will last until late fall. Arroyo may have bought some time, but her course is inherently a risky one. The opposition predictably shows no signs of relenting in its drive to evict her from office. Most of her supporters are likely even more lukewarm than before. Her "will she or won't she" approach to the public confession, coupled with a similar apparent indecision over the extension of the current Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief of Staff General Abu and appointment of his successor, heighten the perception of a weak and vacillating politico, failing to demonstrate desirable leadership skills. She will definitely face a difficult time to advance her substantive agenda, much less to (re)gain significant levels of public and political confidence.

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